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“Nothing New Under the Sun”: Romany Gypsies, Travellers and their Entwined Historical Relationships with London Working-Class Communities”

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“Nothing New Under the Sun”: Romany Gypsies, Travellers and their Entwined Historical Relationships with London Working-Class Communities

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Abstract

This article presents a historical review of policy enactments and urban developments that have historically impacted on accommodation options available to British Romany Gypsies and Travellers. A combination of policy review, analysis of primary historical documents and secondary data sources are utilised in this, the first of two interlinked articles, to present both a general historical overview and to examine legislative and policy approaches to regulating ‘Gypsy and Traveller encampments’ within Greater London over a period of the last 150 years. The impact of regeneration and gentrification on traditional working class areas is considered, suggesting that such dislocation may lead to the ending of diverse populations in inner city localities. Conversely, widespread relocation of former residents to estates on the edge of the city and beyond, may increase contact and rejuvenate community relations between Gypsies, Travellers and other populations, in a way which had been increasingly disrupted by the ‘othering’ of nomadic groups in popular discourse in the post-World War Two period.

Keywords: Gypsies/Travellers; London; Working-class; historical community relations

“Nada Nuevo Bajo el Sol”: Gitanos Romaníes, Travellers y sus Relaciones Históricas Entrelazadas con las Comunidades de Clase Trabajadora de Londres

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Resumen

Este artículo presenta una revisión histórica de las políticas y desarrollos urbano que históricamente han impactado en las opciones de alojamiento disponibles para los gitanos romaníes británicos y los Travellers. Este trabajo (presentado en dos artículos vinculados) se ha realizado a través de una revisión de políticas, análisis de documentos históricos primarios y fuentes de datos secundarias. En él se presenta una visión histórica general y se examinan los enfoques legislativos y políticos de la regulación de los ‘Gypsy and Traveller encampments (campamentos de gitanos y Travellers) dentro del Gran Londres durante los últimos 150 años. Se aborda el impacto de la regeneración y la gentrificación en las clases trabajadoras tradicionales, y se sugiere que tal dislocación puede llevar a acabar con la diversidad popular en el interior de las localidades de la ciudad. Al mismo tiempo, la reubicación generalizada de antiguos residentes en fincas en la periferia de la ciudad y más allá, puede aumentar el contacto y rejuvenecer las relaciones comunitarias entre gitanos, Travellers y otras poblaciones, en una forma que había sido interrumpida por la ‘otredad’ de grupos nómadas en el discurso popular en el periodo posterior a la Segunda Guerra Mundial.

Palabras clave: Nómadas; Londres; Clase obrera; relaciones históricas de la comunidad

The narrative of ‘dangerous’ itinerants dwelling in space regarded as outside of their socially prescribed location is far from a new phenomenon in Britain (Greenfields, 2013; Taylor, 2008). Concerns over urban camps formed of a ‘floating population’ of Gypsies, itinerants and vagrants in and around London and other major conurbations have a long history (Emsley et. al. undated; Ackroyd, 2001; Feheney, 1983). Contrary to a common perception that Gypsies are, and have always been, a rural population, distinct and isolated from “mainstream” communities we demonstrate that there is a long tradition of these peoples living in urban areas alongside working class and migrant populations (Emsley et. al., undated; Petersen, 2013; Winder, 2004). In turn, this “residuum” was regarded with suspicion by both middle-class commentators and the “respectable poor” amongst whom they lived (Garner, 2003; White, 2013; Hitchcock, 2004). This article focuses on areas of settlement for Gypsies (and associated itinerant populations) within London in locations historically regarded as “Metropolitan Gypsyries” (White, 2007; Borrow, 2006).

Within the context of 18th and 19th century London, the presence of Gypsies and Travellers living alongside other marginal groups created an important juxtaposition of social engagement, acting as a catalyst for local praxis and an important ingredient in shaping class cultures. Despite this deeply entwined history, Gypsies and Travellers in urban localities (and particularly those in conventional housing), have been largely neglected by social and urban historians, despite increasing scholarly attention to the role of other minority groups in the making of modern Britain (Winder, 2004). This history is thus largely a “hidden history” of how these communities have resisted state sponsored planning and control, defining and creating their own spaces in such contexts (Sibley, 1995). Even after regulations and by-laws dislodged these urban camps in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many of their inhabitants tenaciously remained, settling locally in more conventional accommodation (Greenfields, 2006). By residing in close proximity to extended family, and maintaining communal structures and economic practices, they were able to resist assimilation and reformulate traditional lifestyles within areas of urban housing whilst partly engaging with the institutions of modern society (Sibley, 1995).

The objectives of this paper consist of an exploration of the historical manifestations of this phenomenon within cultural and geographical ‘space’ in relation to the following three aspects:

1. The legislative and socio-economic forces that resulted in ‘squatter camps’ becoming a prominent feature of urban landscapes between the mid 19th and mid 20th centuries.
2. The official response to urban encampments, which increased in number and size partly as an outcome of policies designed to eradicate the Gypsy and vagrant presence from the countryside.
3. The enduring influence of urban and peri-urban spaces of Gypsy settlement in local folklore, and the legacy of Romany culture in the fabric of local working class cultures in and around London.

In this first paper of a series of two interlinked publications, we provide a general historical overview of inter-community relationships and historical engagement between Gypsies and working-class populations in Greater London in the specified time-frame. In the follow-up article we engage more deeply with rich, locale specific data, to explore variations in practice and local authority responses in different areas of London.

Methodology

The authors have utilised the following data sources and methods of analysis to support the findings and discussions presented within this paper:

- A literature review of sources referencing Gypsies and Travellers in the Metropolis from the 17th Century to the early 20th Century. These were drawn from existing specialists texts on Gypsies and Travellers, books, articles and newspaper reports referring to other itinerant or precariously accommodated populations (e.g. [Samuel, 1973](#); [Reeder, 2006](#)). In addition we refer to local specific studies of the residence patterns and social networks of the urban poor and published memoirs by authors who had lived a traditional life-style in camps (such as [Stanley, 2002](#)). Literature was reviewed using thematic textual analysis to identify both references to a persistent ‘Gypsy’ presence in specific locations, and of the relationships

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and co-existence patterns which commonly existed where Gypsies and Travellers lived in close proximity within urban (and peri-urban) space.

- A second source of data consisted of a review of Hansard (verbatim reporting of debates in Parliament within both the House of Commons and Lords) in relation to specific time frames (for example during the Enclosure Acts in the 1820s or debate on the conditions prevalent in ‘roadside’ encampments, closure of ‘squatter camps’ in the post-war period, and plight of G/T populations following the Belvedere Marshes floods of the 1950s). These were then mapped against themes, which had emerged from the literature review to enable consideration of policy responses to these populations when identified as reaching a degree of visibility or ‘density’ such that they were perceived of as a public ‘problem’ (Assiter, 1892).

- As a sub-set of this review we reviewed the official recording practices of urban encampments and approaches to engaging with G/T populations within specific localised areas. Archive research in specific locales in London revealed that public health officials’ records offered some of the clearest evidence of how G/T populations were viewed by local officers and framed in public authority discourse as populations to be discouraged from travelling, frequently utilising public hygiene arguments as a technique to encourage (or enforce) settlement. Evidence from Medical Officers’ reports pertaining to encampments in a number of urban areas (North, West and South East London) were thus used as evidence of direct policy intervention leading to the settlement of many G/T populations in locales adjoining former stopping places, typically in proximity to the urban poor accommodated in newly developed public housing. In turn, this planned sedentarisation, and the impact on non-G/T working class culture in locales of proximity, is presented through the prism of the authors’ findings from their prior research into the experiences of Gypsies and Travellers living in housing.

Gypsies, Vagrants and Modernity (a historical overview)

Historically, Gypsies in the UK formed one element of a much larger mobile population, that on one hand long troubled the authorities due to their perceived threat to the social order, whilst on the other hand, supplying the

seasonal labour that played a vital role in Britain's economic and industrial development (Trudeau & McMorran, 2011; Mayall, 1988). From the beginning of the industrial revolution until the middle of the 20th century, demand for a seasonal workforce moving between industrial and agricultural sectors required a mobile labour force. Accordingly large scale labour movements between town and country were part of an annual cycle for many of the working classes (Stedman Jones, 2002; Dewey, 1967).

The visibility of Gypsies amongst this mobile population had long been the subject of official notice. A series of draconian "Egyptians Acts" dealing specifically with Gypsies was passed in England between 1531 and 1554 (Mayall, 1997), though Gypsies and vagrants were often conflated in legislation (Beier, 1974). In the collective imagination they were equally subjected to a range of punishments aimed at enforcing settlement, with penalties including whipping, imprisonment, deportation and hanging for those who refused to settle (Beier, 1974; Mayall, 1997). Concerns that the 'settled' population may adopt an itinerant lifestyle were also prominent in policy discourse (Behlmer, 1985).

Rapidly changing working patterns driven by the introduction of 'rational' farming methods created resultant pressures on local economies; coupled with larger farms using more distant markets for the sale of locally grown produce which increased food prices meaning reliance on food imports increased by the 18th century (Bohsted, 2010; Muldrew, 2011). Simultaneously a dramatic expansion in both the urban population and enclosure of land led to falling demand for the goods and services that Gypsies and itinerants had hitherto provided to rural communities (Overton, 1996). The Enclosure Acts closed off approximately 20% of England's surface area to non-landowners between 1760 and 1914, effectively bringing control of what had traditionally been "common land" open to all including Gypsies and itinerant wanderers, into private hands. Landowners were able to enforce such privatised land usage through wide-ranging and often savage penalties (Wordie, 1983; Shaw Taylor, 2001; Shoard, 1987).

These factors, coupled with burgeoning economic opportunities in towns and cities, fuelled a drift towards more heavily populated areas (Mathias, 2001). Despite repeatedly re-enacted legislation to incarcerate or return vagrants to their place of origin, the problem proved intractable, becoming a

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pressing issue as numbers of itinerants rose due to discharged military personnel following the Napoleonic wars in the early decades of the 19th century and simultaneously, a large influx of destitute labourers from Ireland and Scotland (Durstun, 2012). The notorious Vagrancy Act of 1824 was passed in response to public disquiet at the large number of homeless, destitute men and women traversing the country begging for food and money (Mayall, 1988). In tandem, increased local authority regulation pertaining to camping on village greens and commons came into force, with a direct impact on Romany and other travelling people, making camping on traditional ‘aitchin tans’ (stopping places) ever more difficult. Prosecutions against Gypsies stopping on marginal land increased, whilst camping on public highways was also made an offence under the Turnpike Roads Act 1822, and the 1835 Highways Act, leading to a plethora of ways in which to police the actions of nomadic people.

This web of legislation formed a complex backdrop to the lives of Gypsies and other itinerants seeking to travel for work. The 1824 Vagrancy Act was sharply criticised in Parliament by radical social reforming MPs such as Joseph Hume who saw it as an attack on already marginalised and displaced people (Hansard, 1824). However, this did not prevent the legislation being amended on several occasions throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, effecting an increasingly diverse range of groups. Determined efforts were made by rural police forces to drive Gypsy tents off public land pushing them further towards the cities (Taylor, 2008). It is this positioning of Romany Gypsies and other travelling communities within the urban context (a location which is typically perceived of as alien to those of nomadic habit) which forms the core of this paper.

The coalescence of these ‘push factors’ meant that from the 1830s, urban camps and shanty towns became a familiar feature of London’s landscape (Chesney, 1991; Mayhew, 1985). Their inhabitants were not only Gypsies but increasing numbers of vagrant Irish and other elements of London’s poor who were unwilling (or unable) to access housing, particularly as the encroaching great railway termini swept away swathes of working class dwellings, enhancing overcrowding and increasing rents (Dyos, 1982). Thus, the regular seasonal movement between town and country of this casual workforce and the inability of labour and housing markets to generate

sufficient employment and accommodation combined to increase the size and permanence of urban camps throughout 19th century London. Administrative control of such settlements was very much subject to local discretion (Rogers, 1991).

By the late 19th century the increase in vagrancy and semi-permanent camps in and around London was a subject of considerable complaint to Parliamentarians and public authorities concerned with both improving the amenity of London for ratepayers and of “civilising” the poor (e.g. Hansard, 1887; Hansen, 2004). Public health legislation such as the 1889 Infectious Diseases Act and 1891 Public Health (London) Act rapidly followed such official attention, which focused on both the living conditions of Gypsies and other itinerants as well as the impact on “respectable” citizens of the vagrant and Gypsy presence in open spaces. The 1891 Act consolidated previous legislation and gave local authorities the power to make by-laws relating to public health risks and the abatement of various “nuisances”. Section 95 of the Act provided sanitary authorities with powers to inspect tents, vans and sheds used for human habitation and to demand sanitary improvements with the threat of prosecution for non-compliance (Assiter, 1892). The sight of “unclean” and “verminous” people camping and sleeping on commons, greens and parks in the capital, received extensive national press coverage, forcing the London County Council to pass a by-law in 1892 prohibiting “gypsies, hawkers, beggars and vagabonds” from the municipal parks (Reeder, 2006). In 1879, *The Echo* noted that: “the gipsie is haunting the vicinity of towns, losing his characteristic habits and though not decreasing in number is to some degree getting merged among the drifting population that hang on the outskirts of civilization” (*The Echo*, 21st February, 1879).

This quotation marks an important shift in public discourse on Gypsies, moving from romantic stereotypes of a people dwelling within picturesque rural landscapes in brightly painted horse-drawn caravans to that of a people in cultural decline residing in squalor and degeneration. The strength of negative and positive stereotypes is contingent on location such that “Gypsies in the city are likely to appear out of place and to be represented in negative and malign terms” (Sibley, 1995, p. 102). These notions of “rightful place” were strengthened through an increasingly mutual process of boundary maintenance between Gypsies and wider society with whom they

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would have had contact in rural localities (Greenfields, 2013). Within the urban context, the former was forced to resort to areas of slum housing and derelict tracts of land, where they resided with other marginalised groups further reinforcing the association of Gypsies with dirt, disorder and criminality. These peripheral locations also allowed scope for social and spatial boundaries to be maintained within traditional Gypsy community and family structures, while offering scope for working practices, adapted to an urban environment (Trudeau & McMorran, 2011).

Although acknowledged as living *within* the nation state, in a progressively sanitised and petty bourgeois society, Gypsies and other itinerants were increasingly perceived of by legislators, as *apart* from it (Matthews, 2015). Conceptualising Gypsies in this way implied a distinct “geography of savagery”, which naturally led “uncivilised” elements to retreat to the fringes of society. Throughout the latter half of the 19th century driven in part by the rise of anthropology and the work of the Gypsy Lore Society (formed in 1888), Gypsies and Travellers became regarded less as a recognisable and useful element within the rural workforce and were instead perceived of as the most “exotic” and “backward” of all of the marginal populations that were to be removed from civilisation in a manner similar to “savage Irish” vagrants (MacLaughlin, 1999).

One outcome of the massive redevelopment and modernization processes during the Victorian era was the creation of abundant derelict land and peripheral spaces within the city, where many urban camping grounds came to be found (Samuel, 1973). The increasing population density and duration of these camps often acted as a precursor to a more established and permanent Romany and nomadic presence in those locales. In urban environments, Gypsy populations have tended to statically remain in low income neighbourhoods over several generations – not only because of attachment to area, but also their historical association with scarcity which has allowed them to survive, and even thrive, in deprived neighbourhoods (Kornblum, 1975; Smith and Greenfields, 2013). The growing urban presence of Gypsies and increased rates of intermarriage with the urban poor, led to a significant degree of cultural exchange with the urban working classes, increasing the population falling within the Gypsies’ cultural spread (Acton, 1974). Such associations and exchanges for example have arisen from the proximity of camps and peri-urban housing along the Thameside

marshes on the south-east fringes of London and Kent making the Romany element an important component of working class culture in North Kent (Evans, 2004; Watts, 2008).

It is the juxtaposition of working class and Gypsy life and the influence of the camps and their inhabitants on the social and cultural composition of local class cultures, which forms the second section of this paper. This is explored through case-studies of specific localities, bounded by, and abutting the Greater London region (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Map of Greater London and surrounding areas, illustrating ‘Metropolitan Gypsyries’ and places of settlement. Source: <http://wikimapia.org/>

Urban Enclaves and the ‘Metropolitan Gypsyries’

In 1864, George Borrow, a key figure in popularising the ‘romantic’ image of Gypsies, visited three of London’s main ‘Metropolitan Gypsyries’, the largest of which was on the borders of Battersea and Wandsworth in south-west London. Gypsy settlements were already well established in Battersea

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by the early 19th century and they occupied fields close to the Thames, on what is now Battersea Park. Economic opportunities originally drew them to the area. Since Elizabethan times, the fields were a popular and notorious place of entertainment, with attractions that reportedly enticed the “riff raff” of London (Weinreb et. al. 2010, p. 48). In addition to Romany inhabitants, Borrow noted other “strange, wild guests...who, without being Gypsies have much of Gypsyism in their habits and who far exceed the Gypsies in number” (2006, p. 245). Ranking these groups hierarchically, Borrow constructed a socio-ethnographic typology, with Romany Gypsies at the apex and the non-Romany travellers and itinerant salesmen (of “low Saxon” origin) and vagrant Irish who camped with the Gypsies, at the base (2006, p. 245). Borrow’s account set the tone for much of the later writings on Gypsies and other nomadic groups such as the Gypsy Lore Society, which in its early days was much influenced by his work. The perception of the Gypsies’ cultural decline was attributed by Borrow and subsequent “Gypsy lorists” to increasing interaction with vagrants, beggars and other pretenders to Gypsyhood. Indeed the notion that “true” Gypsies are on the verge of extinction due to urbanisation has informed depictions of this group ever since (Arnold, 1970; Charlemagne, 1984).

When Borrow visited Battersea, south London was growing at a rapid pace, with its population quadrupling from 500,000 to nearly 2 million between 1841 and 1901 (Draper, 2004). The expansion of the city south of the River Thames drew in many Gypsies and rural poor from the agricultural counties of Surrey, Sussex and Kent, who would have a discernible influence on the formative social and cultural make-up of working class south London. Further, the outskirts of London were increasingly favoured over inner city locations for industrial activities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries due to environmental legislation in the capital, and production cycles in many local factories harmonised with the annual demand for seasonal labour leading to increasing settlement of itinerant populations in such localities.

By the late 19th century Surrey contained one of the highest populations of both Gypsies and ‘vagrants’ in the country, with an estimate of 10,000. Both Croydon and Mitcham in Surrey on the southern borders of London were already long-established as “Gypsy areas” and Mitcham in particular was the main centre from where many of the Gypsies south of the capital

emanated, and to where many returned after their annual travels. Despite the Mitcham Common Act of 1891 prohibiting camping on that open land, it failed to dislodge the Gypsy presence and by the early 20th century they formed an established community in the area. Many settled more or less permanently in Mitcham's several established caravan yards, or moved into the terraced houses of what became known as 'Redskin village'. By the mid-1930s 'Redskin village' in Mitcham had become one of the most notorious localities in south London, due to the reputation of its inhabitants; its dilapidated housing; piecemeal industrial development and excessive industrial pollution from the "dirty industries" that were based in the area (Montague, 2006). In the 1930s Mitcham contained the highest proportion of Gypsy schoolchildren in Surrey, with health inspectors casually noting that many were of "low mentality" (Michison, 1941, pp. 66-67). Such disparaging and uncritical misrepresentations of Gypsies replicated the notion that residence in caravans or in conditions of poverty was indicative of a lack of civilisation and that only members of those populations would by choice live in such a manner.

In 1932, the Chief Medical Officer for Mitcham reported that many of the van dwellers were not in fact of "the nomadic class" but families who had been forced into such accommodation through poverty. His survey of one local site was prepared at a period when an explicit and widespread assimilatory drive targeted at Gypsies, Travellers and other itinerants was returning to prominence. This was coupled with increased Parliamentary debate on the need to enhance the health and education status of individuals who could be utilised to form the backbone of a nation recovering from (or potentially preparing for another) World War (Hansard, 1948). Thus local authority and public health driven initiatives between the 1930s and 1950s consistently sought to "sedentarise" and "retrain" caravan dwellers with the intent of "civilising" them into modern life, essentially engaging them in the modern nation-state project; a drive common elsewhere in Europe in the same period (Schuch, 2017; Bancroft, 2005).

Despite the doubtless insanitary conditions in such sites, many residents were however determined to remain within their own kin-groups and retain their lifestyles and working practices. This was often preferred to submitting to the increasing control, monitoring and regulation of visitors, employment

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and social behaviour which were part of the middle class project of improving the health and morals of the poor (Flint & Powell, 2014). Accordingly, many Gypsies and other residents of yards, camps and shanty-towns strenuously resisted attempts by public authorities to encourage or enforce movement into housing for several more decades, despite the baffled insistence of agents of the state that their lives would improve by leaving such squalid conditions.

Longevity of residence may be argued to be a particular characteristic of Romany and Traveller communities in urban settings. Eighty years later, Mitcham is still home to a substantial population of inter-related families, many of whom claim Gypsy heritage. During his trip to Notting Dale (now Notting Hill in west London), Borrow classed the entire area as a Gypsy region “where Gypsies or gentry whose habits very much resemble those of Gypsies, may at any time be found” (2006, p. 250). The area was originally settled by Gypsies around 1800 and by the mid-19th century it was reported that between 40 and 50 Gypsy families regularly camped between the Kensington Potteries and Wormwood Scrubs on land used for cavalry exercises, and in a location regarded as suitably far from respectable society.

Despite the aspirations of its developers who eyed the chance to gentrify the area and make substantial money in the wake of the coming of the railways, redevelopment of the Notting Dale area in the late 19th Century, they failed to dislodge the Gypsies and vagrant Irish, with many moving into the newly built dwellings which grew up around their former camping sites. Despite the housing development, the attachment of former residents to the locality proved off-putting to many of the lower middle-class tenants envisaged by the investors. In turn, the new-build properties became imbued with a poor reputation, retaining their association as the haunt of marginalised and at times suspiciously itinerant slum-dwellers, who lived in over-crowded (and deteriorating) accommodation – a necessity which enabled them to afford the rents on such properties.

The stigma attached to the area remained well into the 20th Century, throughout both the 1930s when the area welcomed refugees from the Spanish civil war and in the 1950s when Caribbean settlers who were unable to find accommodation elsewhere, located to Notting Dale and surrounding localities (Whetlor, 1998). Until gentrification of the area commenced in the

1970s, the Notting Dale area retained a flavour of marginalised, multi-culturalism, an area open to waves of new migrants who lived alongside long-established denizens - in a manner echoing the experiences of residents of the ethnic melting-pot of East London (Fishman, 1988; Winder, 2004)

In the 19th Century Borrow noted a colony of housed Gypsies in one of the streets in Shoreditch in East London close to well-used traditional stopping places “who are in the habit of receiving and lodging their brethren passing through London to and from Essex and other counties east of the metropolis” (Borrow, 2006, p. 253). The Gypsy camp in Shoreditch was also described by Arthur Morrison in his loosely fictionalised novel *A Child of the Jago* published in 1896. Gypsy camps were still present in the East End into the 1930s with many yards sandwiched between the slums of Aldgate, Limehouse and the East India Dock Road (The Spectator, 1935, p. 14). In north-east London the main Gypsy settlement was at Hackney Wick on the marsh meadows by the River Lea, with other well-established settlements at Tottenham, Finsbury Park and Stratford (Samuel 1973, p. 130). In turn many of these Gypsies and Travellers settled into local housing and intermixed with the working class inhabitants of those areas, as well as with earlier migrants and their descendants – the Irish, Jews from the Baltic states and the occasional ‘Lascar’ or Caribbean resident. By the 1880s these formerly nomadic inhabitants of north London were, like many Gypsies in other parts of London, semi-settled, rarely straying far from the metropolis and content to make a living hawking goods in the winter and spending the summer in Epping Forest and neighbouring Havering, or fruit and hop-picking in Kent, Surrey and Sussex. (Little Folk, 1888, p. 7-8; Hidden London, undated).

From the Interwar ‘Van Towns’ to the 1968 Caravan Act

As the state played an increasingly central role in the regulation, location and provision of accommodation for Gypsies and Travellers throughout the 20th century, areas of settlement were impacted both directly and indirectly. Wartime legislation such as The Defence of the Realm Act originally introduced in 1914 and later acts including the Emergency Powers (Defence) Act 1939 gave the government extensive powers to regulate the movement of populations. One such restriction concerned the prohibition of camping in

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certain areas, which were of potential interest to troop training or movement, once again driving many Gypsies and Travellers closer to urban areas (Clark & Greenfields, 2006). As in the 19th century Public Health Acts also played a major role in allowing officials to regulate and scrutinize the lives of nomadic families. The 1936 Public Health Act classified tents, caravans and sheds as “statutory nuisances” if they were judged to constitute a health risk to their inhabitants or gave rise to nuisance impacting on other local residents or businesses (Taylor, 2008). Councils were often reluctant to invoke their powers under the Act, as they would then have been responsible for re-accommodating the occupants, though the insanitary and overcrowded conditions that existed on many camps led to a steady rise in actions taken against van dwellers throughout the latter part of the 1930s (Ravetz & Turkington, 2011, p. 102). Section 269 of the Act granted the local authority powers to control the usage of moveable dwellings and to issue licenses authorising the use of land for camp sites. This regulation proved to be a precursor to more extensive regulation, and later direct control, of sites in the 1960s, commencing with the Caravan Sites and Control of Development Act 1960 and culminating in the 1968 Caravans Sites Act.

Not only increased legislation, but also population growth and increased suburbanisation throughout the early decades of the 20th century shifted the location of urban settlements, as many of the old-established enclaves were erased through slum clearance and redevelopment. Accordingly, it was on the margins of the city where there was a less intrusive police presence, ample undeveloped land and space to graze horses, that many of the “van towns” that peppered the outer ring of London and other urban conurbations in the early to mid-20th century were located. These in turn grew ever larger, as groups of displaced Gypsies moved to co-locate with other caravan dwellers.

The perhaps surprising toleration of these large, sprawling camps needs to be seen against the backdrop of serious housing shortages post-1918, and again after World War Two (Burnett, 1986). The sale of abandoned agricultural land in the interwar period led to a growth of “plotland” developments of self-build housing. In common with Gypsy camps, these working class settlements were criticised by public authorities and large land-owners as abhorrent eye-sores that blighted the home-counties (Sibley,

1995, p. 87-88). The proliferation of makeshift “shanty towns” developed by homeless urban dwellers, led to increasing co-existence and intermarriage with Gypsies and Travellers. A further surge in improvised accommodation occurred after World War II with more than 45,000 returning servicemen and their families occupied decommissioned military camps (Webber, 2012, p. 125-146). Although these occupations elicited considerable public sympathy, they were quickly quashed by the Town and Country Planning Act of 1948. This granted local authorities the power to control “disorderly development” with working class people and Gypsies and Travellers progressively excluded from rural and aspirational middle class space, as the state gained greater control over how and where homeless people could (and should) live (Shoard, 1987).

Despite official opposition to self-provision, such “DIY developments” formed an important stop-gap measure in meeting housing shortages in the post-war period, with government policy moving towards recognition that such accommodation was required in the medium-term. Accordingly, tacit encouragement was given to the development of regulated residential caravan sites and (separate) Gypsy site provision. In part this was due to public and local authority disquiet over the presence of unlicensed caravan camps in close proximity to residential areas occupied by the slightly more affluent or “respectable” working and middle-classes and for the government, the political embarrassment of apparently condoning large-scale caravan dwelling for ‘ordinary working people’ unable to access housing (Hansard House of Lords, 1960).

Whilst not explicitly referring to Gypsies, the “Caravan Sites and Control of Development Act 1960” prohibited unauthorised site development through requiring that site owners obtained a licence to station residential caravans and further, granted local authorities additional powers to evict those camping on common land. This had two immediate outcomes, which were to impact profoundly on public and media perceptions towards Gypsies and other caravan dwellers. Firstly, regulation of land use under the 1960 Act not only impacted large-scale camps but also tiny family stopping places provided by farmers to whom Gypsy families paid rent to stay on the land over the winter when not engaged in farm labour. As a result of receiving fines for running ‘unauthorised caravan sites’ many farmers were

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forced to evict Gypsies and Travellers whom they had known for many years, disrupting social networks and friendships between communities. This in turn created greater social distance and enhanced the ‘othering’ of nomadic populations (Greenfields, 2013).

Second, the visible increase in “roadsiders”, combined with the closure of common land and loss of stopping places, led to a dramatic rise in encampments being set up close to house dwellers as London’s suburbs expanded outwards. In turn, enforced proximity raised awareness of the “Gypsy problem” intensifying demands from members of the public local authorities struggling to deal with evictions, and concerned Parliamentarians, that the government deal with the imminent ‘crisis’ in Gypsy accommodation (Hansard, 1961, p. c818).

Parliamentary debates following the 1960 Act reveal the concern of the State to permanently settle non-Gypsy caravan dwellers (Hansard, 1961: c802). These debates distinguished different subsections of the “wandering tribes”, the “tinkers”, “didikois” and in particular “true” Gypsies (Hansard, 1961, p. c803). The tensions inherent within these deliberations which stressed “integration” of Gypsies whilst permitting of a phased adoption of a sedentary lifestyle in recognition that “the fact that the Romanies are still with us after hundreds of years suggests that the pace cannot be forced” (Hansard, 1961, p. c802) were further distinguished by a concern that Britain should not be seen to morally lag behind other countries such as France, Holland and Finland. These countries were creating campsites for their Gypsies and itinerant groups where a reasonable standard of living and access to public services were achieved (Hansard, 1961, p. cc806-609).

Policy Approaches to the ‘Gypsy Problem’ in the 1960s

At both local and national level and driven by the campaigning efforts of the Labour MP Norman Dodds (Smith and Acton, 2017), a general consensus grew amongst politicians and officials that tackling the seemingly intractable problem of large camps on urban and peri-urban wastelands, required a national and coordinated approach. It was in this context that the 1968 Caravan Sites Act was passed. This Act allowed authorities to spatially control their local Gypsy populations through settlement at specified

locations, whilst simultaneously creating a mechanism to expel recalcitrant (or “out of place”) elements of the travelling population. The Act allowed local authorities to apply for “designation” status once a minimum quota of site provision had been made effectively creating an exclusion zone for Gypsies seeking to camp within the local authority area, and minimising the likelihood that site licences or planning permission would be granted for additional sites by the local authority. The London Boroughs were afforded a particular exemption, allowing them to achieve designation if they provided up to 15 pitches each. This, effectively excluded most Gypsies from residing in, or resorting to, the capital and increased the pressure to move into houses, continually orbit in caravans around the edges of the city; or risk stopping on unauthorised camps on waste land and facing rapid (and sometimes violent) eviction. Despite the well-meaning intentions of the 1968 Act’s supporters, most local authorities who complied with the legislation built sites in isolated areas far from the surrounding community (Cemlyn et. al., 2009). Many were poorly serviced and situated close to rubbish dumps, sewerage plants, railway lines and motorways which, like the ad-hoc camps of a century earlier, reinforced associations of Gypsies with dirt and disorder and did little to improve the health of residents (Hawes & Perez, 1995). Thus the requirement for local authorities to provide sites often exacerbated the plight of nomadic peoples in the UK, a situation which continues to impact negatively to the current day (Greenfields & Brindley, 2016).

Contextualising Gypsy and Working Class Lives: Accommodation, Adaptation and Resistance

By the time that the 1968 Caravan Act made site provision largely the responsibility of the state, the aspirations of working class people in Britain had changed (Johnson, 1994). A general hunger existed for accessing not only educational and training opportunities, but also a range of new (often technologically skilled or non-manual) employment opportunities, which had previously been closed to working-class people (Goldthorpe & Lockwood, 1963; Marks, 2003). Whilst for the majority the drive for a ‘brave new world’ was linked to an increasing desire for good quality modern housing and material goods (Hoggart, 1957), these aspirations were

largely outwith the available opportunities (or world-views) of Romany and travelling people. For members of these populations, a decline in their material circumstances had often occurred as their way of life was eroded by declining traditional employment opportunities coupled with increased social monitoring and state control. Many Gypsies and Travellers expressed no desire to move into houses with all of the ‘mod cons’; considering that the price to be paid for greater economic inclusion was too high as well as being unattractive because of a lack of congruence with their working patterns (Adams, et. al. 1975), aspirations, cultural values and priorities (Evans, 2004; Stanley, 2002; Greenfields, 2006).

During the post-War period, the widespread shift in ideals and aspirations led to a growing segmentation between working class people and Gypsies and other Travellers. This separation of experience has led to a common perception that the communities are very distinct in culture and practice as their closely related histories have been forgotten (Greenfields, 2013). From the early 1950s as new housing became more readily available, the majority of non-Gypsies were eager to leave behind memories of residence in “camps” or old, poor quality working-class housing (Langhamer, 2005). Thus dwelling in caravans or shacks was regarded with disdain in this aspirational new world and the “Gypsy problem” was seen as outside of the realm of standard housing duties and indicative of reluctant engagement with a troublesome minority who would not accept the benefits of rising living standards. This perception increased in the minds of the public who through the 1950s and 1960s embraced the opportunities afforded by full employment, free higher education and a well-resourced welfare state, and in turn this negative viewpoint was (and still is) enhanced by media representations which emphasised the wilful ‘difference’ of nomadic populations (Richardson & O’Neill, 2010; Kabachnik, 2010).

Whilst the tendency to decry the sight of roadside encampments became more vociferous following the enactment of the Caravan Sites Act of 1968, such simplistic responses failed to account for the main reason for the 1968 Act’s failure, a combination of vociferous local opposition to site development and a lack of political will in Westminster to enforce compliance by local authorities (Clark & Greenfields, 2006; Niner, 2004).

Throughout the 1970s little changed for Gypsies in policy terms until the election of the Conservative Government in 1979. The impact of ideologies of ‘self-provision’ of housing across all sectors (including that of caravan sites) impacted on Gypsy and Traveller policy by emphasising the responsibility of members of those communities (rather than the state) to purchase their own land and apply for (albeit rarely granted) planning permission. The reduction in state provided sites which arose from this policy shift also brought Gypsies and Travellers into greater contact with formerly housed individuals who increasingly adopted a nomadic way of life partly as a result of unemployment and housing shortages (commonly represented in the press as ‘New Age Travellers’).

Ironically, this resurgence of contact between Gypsies and formerly housed/settled populations, once more aroused political disquiet at the number of non-Gypsies nomadising, and interventions were made by politicians determined to ensure that taking to the road was made as difficult as possible for those tempted to adopt such a lifestyle (Mayall, 1997). In direct response to increasing numbers of vehicle dwelling ‘New Travellers’, the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act (CJPOA, 1994) contained swingeing regulation of where and how Gypsies and other Travellers park up, supported by harsh financial and practical penalties, including seizure of trailers and ultimately imprisonment. In the wake of such legislation, a substantial proportion of ‘New Travellers’ either returned to housing or moved abroad to continue their way of life, leaving ethnic Gypsies and Travellers to bemoan the destruction of their traditional way of life (Clark & Greenfields, 2006).

Despite the wholesale destructive changes wrought on traditional Gypsy life styles by the passing of the CJPOA (and indeed long-term damage done to Gypsy-non-Gypsy relationships by the impact of their encounters with New Travellers), a significant proportion of Romany and Traveller households in the 21st Century still either cling to residence on authorised sites or brave the vagaries of the road rather than move into housing. These have been the subject of ongoing policy debate and enactments by successive Governments preoccupied with the problem of reducing unauthorised encampments, whilst complying with Human Rights law, (which has mitigated the worst impacts of the CJPOA through recognising

the rights of these ethnic minorities to lead their traditional life). Despite the minor amelioration of the situation of Gypsies and Travellers caused by European law, the circumstances of these populations remain dire in the light of extreme shortages of site provision for those unable or unwilling to enter into housing (ERTF, 2015; National Federation of Gypsy Liaison Groups, 2014; Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2016).

The exclusions experienced by these diverse nomadic (and formerly nomadic) populations have been subject to the attention of the United Nations working group (periodic review) on the United Kingdom (Lang, 2017). This contained a number of recommendations highlighting the need to develop effective strategies in relation to human rights, access to services and integration of the Gypsy and Traveller populations of Britain. It is increasingly recognised at international level that without adequate policy interventions and political will, members of the Gypsy and Traveller communities in Britain face increasing marginalisation and exclusion, because they are not adequately recognised as national minorities whose needs and desires may both differ from, and be entwined with, the populations amongst whom they have lived for so long.

Perhaps of most interest, however, has been that over the last half century many members of formerly nomadic households have been accommodated by local authorities on housing estates, often on the edges of London and other major cities. Romany and Traveller populations are once more in close contact with often socially and economically excluded non-Gypsies in a complex relationship of conflict and cooperation, albeit that such enforced assimilation has in some cases been devastating in both social and cultural terms for many Gypsies and Travellers (Smith & Greenfields, 2013). Despite this, the influence and fluidity of cultural influences remains strong, suggesting that resistance to loss of identity and the enrichment of both working-class and Gypsy culture, has only been shallowly suppressed by the separation of the groups in recent decades.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the lasting legacy on the social fabric of working class neighbourhoods of the Gypsy and Traveller presence within London

communities and the complex entwining of social relationships between nomadic and settled populations. The story of such interactions is far from finished. Intensified gentrification and a huge shortage of affordable housing offers new challenges to the vibrant resilience of working class culture in London; impacting on Gypsies and Travellers amongst other long-established – often ethnically diverse - communities. If social cleansing of the poor as a by-product of urban regeneration and globalisation continues, it may succeed in doing what has never occurred before in the city, eradicating the dangerous potential for shared movement, resistance and alternative modes of defending both culture and ‘homespace’; however, and wherever, these are constituted. If so, London will become much the poorer as the centuries long “Gypsy presence” declines along with that of the urban working classes with whom a symbiotic (and often problematic) relationship exists, both historically and in contemporary society.

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